

Civil Discourse Resources and Guidance for Educators

The challenge for each educator is to ensure that all students develop into citizens that are capable of critical thinking and can engage respectfully in dialogue and debate. Educators know that peaceful and intellectual discourse are essential for the success of a democracy. Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) supports educators as they intentionally respond to events in the news. IDOE recognizes the ever-changing needs of classroom instruction and student well-being that arise from such events. This guide is meant to serve educators as you facilitate conversations with students.

Recommendations for Civil Discourse

- Seek guidance from school administration first.
- Ask about your school corporation's position about the events.
- Connect to [Indiana Academic Standards](#)¹.
- Develop a plan with grade level colleagues or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
- Utilize educators in your building to facilitate discussions.
- Be mindful of your personal opinions in conversations and on social media.
- Utilize [Indiana Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Competencies](#)¹.

Anticipated Teacher Questions to Leadership

- How do I engage in discourse about current events without risking my job?
- Should I and how do I communicate with families that discussions were held in class? What do I do if families are angry or upset?
- What sources are unbiased and reliable to cite when sharing information with students?
- When is it appropriate to address current events during the school day?

Teaching Strategies

Base conversations on texts, images, and objective sources to answer student questions.

Interruptor Phrases: shorter responses to alleviate in-the-moment, harmful student comments.

- "Please consider the impact of what you are saying."
- "Hold on. I need to process what you are saying."
- [Difficult Dialogues](#)²

Using Zoom Breakout Rooms: create rooms based on how students feel, what they want, or feel capable of talking about. (adapted from [Beyond the Stoplight](#))

- Room 1 - for students who do not want to discuss the events right now and want to work independently on "regular" classroom content.
- Room 2 - for students who want to process the events with a partner with guiding questions.
- Room 3 - for students who have questions and want to process with you.
- Room 4 - for students who want to independently journal to process the events with some guiding questions.

Anticipated Student Questions - Elementary

- What happened and why did it happen?
- Why are people so upset?
- How do decisions made in our country? How does our government work? ([Separation of Powers Lessons](#)³)
- What is the Constitution and how is the Constitution involved?
- Am I safe? Do I need to be worried?

Discussion Questions - Elementary

Consider: Encourage students to share and ask questions. Use texts that provide age-appropriate information, ensure students feel safe, secure, and protected.

- Show images of current events and ask “What do you see?” “What is happening” “How do you feel?” “What questions do you have?”
- What thoughts and feelings do you have?
- Why do you think this happened?
- What do you think this means for our country?
- How can we unite people in our country? How do we find the good?
- What can you do if you disagree with someone or a decision? How could you voice your opinion in a way that is helpful?
- How do we find truth? How do we distinguish between truth and rumor?
- How can you say you do not like something without using violence towards others or objects?

Question stems for [Asking Questions as News Unfolds](#)⁴

Anticipated Student Questions - Secondary

- What was the timeline of the events that occurred? What groups or factions were involved?
- To what extent, if any, was the state and federal government involved?
- What was the goal of the actions? *What are alternatives that deliver the same results?*
- How do we determine “fake news”?
- What can I do about this situation?
- How do I share my opinion in a positive and respectful manner?
- What is civil disobedience?

Discussion Questions - Secondary

Consider: Use **text** (writing, images, and/or music) as a means to circle conversations back to the discussion.

- What is happening in the text? Who are the actors?⁵
- Who in the text has power? How can you tell?
- Do you think this text will surprise readers? Why?
- Is there unfairness or injustice in the text?
- How can you relate this text to your own experience or community?

Other questions:

- What *information* have you heard about the recent events?⁶
- What questions should you consider before sharing news on social media?
- How do we know what sources of information to trust and find reliable?
- What is interesting or helpful about a certain point of view?²

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is an integral part of education and youth development. Insight and connection can be specifically tied to civil discourse lessons and conversations.

Insight: is the ability to know your emotions and how they affect your thoughts and actions.

[2A.](#) (page 22)¹ Students identify a wide range of emotions.

Strategies:

- Encourage students to draw their emotions using words or pictures.
- Practice using language such as “I feel” rather than “I am” when expressing emotions.
- Create or reference existing feelings or emotional vocabulary word walls to identify how the events are making them feel.

Consider reading the following books to reinforce emotional awareness, empathy, connection, cultural responsiveness, and collaboration:

Grades K-4

Feelings by Alik

I'm Mad Dealing With Feelings by Elizabeth Crary

One by Kathryn Otoshi

Two by Kathryn Otoshi

The Pinkish, Purplish, Bluish Egg by Bill Peet

Those Shoes by Maribeth Boelts

Grades 5-12

Are You There God? It's Me Margaret by Judy Blume

Charlotte's Web by E.B. White

Crazy Lady! by Jane Leslie Conly

Souder by William Armstrong

Great-Uncle Albert Forgets by Ben Schechter

The Gift by Aliana Brodmann

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry

Connection: refers to the ability to have strong social awareness, giving students the ability to take the perspectives of others, and empathize with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures.

[5A.](#) (page 46)¹ Students treat others fairly and respectfully, is able to see multiple perspectives and is open-minded.

[5B.](#) (page 48)¹ Students demonstrate care and concern for other.

Strategies:

- Help students learn the importance of various perspectives or use the three specific strategies outlined in [this article](#)¹⁰.
- Teach students about ["I-messages"](#)¹³ and practice when and how to use them; model the use of "I-messages" as often as possible.
- Complete the lesson plan “Perspective Taking” from [IDOE's SEL Lesson plans](#)¹ on page 39 (geared towards grades 3-5).
- How can you be a Changemaker?
Changemakers use peaceful means to bring about changes big and small.

Thinking about current events ask students to consider the following questions:

- What was the problem they were trying to solve?
- Who was involved or affected?
- Why was it hard to solve the problem?
- Identify what was disruptive and how it could have been done peacefully.
- What is something you feel passionate about and want to be a Changemaker?

SEL Extension Activities

[Building Empathy Toolkit](#)

[Core Emotions List](#)

[Sara Ahmed's "What's in the News" Activity](#)

Resources

Being Intentional about Discourse, Discussion, and Dialogue

- [Let's Talk](#)⁵
- [Civil Discourse in the Classroom - Moderating a Discussion](#)⁵
- [Stanford University Read Like a Historian](#)⁷
- [Discussing Tragic Events in the News](#)⁸
- [Seven Ways to Teach Civil Discourse](#)⁹
- [Difficult Dialogues](#)²
- [When Controversy Hits Your Community](#)¹⁰

Civics Support

- [Separation of Powers](#)³
- [Indiana Department of Education Civics Education Resources](#)¹
- [Resources for Teachers](#)¹¹
- [ABA Teacher Portal](#)¹²

Content Support

- [Indiana Academic Standards](#)¹
- [IDOE Social Studies Standards](#)¹
- [Teaching Strategies with Elementary in Mind](#)⁵

Considering Sources and Misinformation

- [Fact or Fiction? How Can Students Sort Misinformation?](#)¹³
- ["Teaching Kids Media Smarts During Breaking News"](#)¹²

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Support

- [IDOE SEL Competencies](#)¹
- [IDOE SEL Toolkit](#)¹
- [I-Messages](#)¹³
- [Helping Kids Navigate Scary News Stories](#)¹⁵
- [How to Support Students with Trauma](#)¹⁶
- [How to Talk to Kids About Difficult Subjects](#)¹⁵

Citations

1. Indiana Department of Education
2. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching
3. National Constitution Center
4. Twitter
5. Teaching Tolerance
6. Facing History in Ourselves
7. Stanford University
8. Morningside Center
9. The Conversation
10. Edutopia
11. Indiana University Center on Representative Government
12. American Bar Association
13. SEL Space
14. Public Broadcasting System (PBS)
15. Common Sense Media
15. Education Elements

Questions can be directed to IDOE [here](#).